

The English Leaflet

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PRÉCIS WRITING

During a recent visit to England, where I had the opportunity of seeing the work in English in many of the best-known schools of Great Britain, I was greatly interested in the superior quality of their instruction in composition. As I studied the various methods by which this superiority is secured, I became convinced that no small part of it is due to their fundamental conception in English teaching of making thought and content basic. In most schools far more attention is paid to this than to the type of drill which emphasizes mechanics and perfection of form. And one of the classroom practices which secures this emphasis upon thought and content, is technically known as **précis writing**. Practice in **précis** writing is there commenced at a comparatively early age and continued through the upper grades and on through the universities.

I of course realize that in some of our American schools we have done work which carries out the same general intent as that which directs the making of the **précis**; we have exercises in abridging, summarizing, abstract-making, and condensation. Indeed, recent questions of the College Entrance Examination Board, especially the English Comprehensive Examinations, have taken the value of this work into strict account. Yet in practically none of our schools have we pursued this method systematically; it has all been sporadic, and limited pretty exclusively to the closing year of the secondary school, when many of our teachers have centered their attention upon the drill which prepares their pupils for the college-entrance examinations. And certainly in all these efforts we have evolved no generally accepted technique for the making of a satisfactory **précis**.

As Miss Tucker has done some special work in this field, I have asked her briefly to outline the method.

The Editor.

SUGGESTIONS FOR PRÉCIS WRITING.

L. FRANCES TUCKER

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Could any type of composition come into vogue at a more opportune time than does précis writing! In a period when so many forces outside of school minimize our instructions, whatever offers genuine assistance in forming good habits of expression, in promoting clear thinking, and even in developing character, is no mean force in our task of "Englishing the young." Just these needs are met by the précis.

The précis cannot justly be called in itself a literary form. It stimulates primarily not the creative but the analytical powers. But since in its construction the relation of ideas must be ferreted out; since a deliberate choice must be made between what is essential and what is not; and since lucidity is of paramount importance, it must be said to foster the qualities that underlie all composition of any lasting value. By its demands are dissipated looseness, vagueness, and diffuseness, the recognized foes of good literary productions.

Simply stated, précis work is the making of a summary or abstract of a piece of writing. This kind of exercise has, of course, been used by painstaking teachers from time immemorial. Not until recently, however, have specific rules of procedure been promulgated here in America. Fathered by the French and English, it is now invested with a new dignity and thus afforded an opportunity to perform for us a salutary service.

From the following rules for the writing of précis one can readily comprehend how this type of exercise promotes concentration of thought, keen discrimination, clear and succinct expression.

Rule I. Read the selection or selections carefully for general sense. Be sure to grasp the whole idea, for much depends on the first reading.

Rule II. Read again. Select the salient points. Underline the passages that are important. What cannot be omitted but must be condensed, may be checked. If the selection is a paragraph only, note the topic sentence. Don't overestimate its value, however. It is only a clue. Note repeti-

tion of words, phrases; observe synonymous expressions. Don't overlook the hints given by conjunctions and by parallel structure. Study the relation of ideas.

Rule III. Jot down the essentials. Any modifications must be subordinate to the main points.

Rule IV. Write the first draft with the eye on the salient points. Err on the side of too great length. Do not select sentences here and there from the original. Be independent. The language of the original may sometimes be desirable, but more likely it is not. The logical sequence of thought must be retained, of course.

Rule V. Estimate the length of the first draft. The passage should usually be reduced to one-fourth or one-third of its original.

Rule VI. Reduce to proper length. All rhetorical graces must be eliminated. Cull all verbiage and literary ornament. Look askance at adjectives; they may be merely decorative. Figures and illustrative quotations must be omitted. Adjective phrases may be packed into an epithet; e. g., "in conformity with the law" becomes "legal." Be economical in phrasing; e. g., "if they permit a single point to escape them" becomes "if a single point escapes them." Show by connectives the relations of thoughts.

Rule VII. Use the past tense. Do not use the first or second person.

Rule VIII. The final draft must be connected and smooth, pointed and balanced. Short, simple rather than involved sentence structure is desirable. Be sure to have each sentence complete.

It is evident that the power to follow these rules successfully is not attained by a single bound. Preparatory work for this type of exercise should begin in the grades. Here again the *précis* arrives in the "fullness of time," for the new emphasis now being placed on silent reading plays directly into our hands. Just the powers the pupil needs it develops. Witness the statement of Dr. E. B. Richards, New York State Supervisor of English, in the January number of the "English Bulletin": "A third factor in the process of learning completely to read silently . . . is the power to or-

ganize the results of one's reading It means also that the reader must have learned that not everything in every selection is of equal value; he must have learned how to select the really worthwhile information and how to eliminate the less apposite facts, to evaluate what he has read.' When through the grades this work is carried on successfully, the précis will present no difficulties. It will be a mere matter of record.

For those of us who are not yet able to avail ourselves of this preliminary training, but are eager to give our older pupils the benefit of this type of exercise—indeed, are forced by the Comprehensive Examination to do so—the following selections will be found useful. Several of these have been tested with pupils.

A good paragraph to begin with is the following. It so obviously falls into three parts that even the pupil of ordinary powers may have the joy of success in his first effort at précis writing.

Such were Addison's talents for conversation. But his rare gifts were not exhibited to crowds or to strangers. As soon as he entered a large company, as soon as he saw an unknown face, his lips were sealed and his manners became constrained. None who met him only in great assemblies would have been able to believe that he was the same man who had often kept a few friends listening and laughing round a table, from the time when the play ended, till the clock of St. Paul's in Covent Garden struck four. Yet, even at such a table, he was not seen to the best advantage. To enjoy his conversation in the highest perfection it was necessary to be alone with him, and to hear him, in his own phrase, think aloud. "There is no such a thing," he used to say, "as real conversation but between two persons."

Macaulay.

This may be reduced to the following sentence:

Addison's unique powers of conversation were shown not at all to strangers, but very well indeed to a group of friends and best of all to an intimate.

This may be followed by a paragraph from Palmer's *Self-Cultivation in English*.

Why, then, do we hesitate to swell our words to meet our needs? It is a nonsense question. There is no reason. We are

simply lazy; too lazy to make ourselves comfortable. We let our vocabularies be limited, and get along rawly without the refinements of human intercourse, without refinements in our own thoughts; for thoughts are almost as dependent on words as words on thoughts. For example, all exasperations we lump together as "aggravating," not considering whether they may not rather be displeasing, annoying, offensive, disgusting, irritating, or even maddening; and without observing, too, that in our reckless usage we have burned up a word which might be convenient when we should need to mark some shading of the word "increase." Enlarge the vocabulary. Let any one who wants to see himself grow, resolve to adopt two new words each week.

While it is easy to get the thought in this selection, it is not so easy to express it in as satisfactory words as has the author. Possibly this is not too inadequate:

We are slow to increase our vocabularies to satisfy our necessities because we are indolent. This fault prevents us from using correctly many words through want of differentiation. One remedy for this lack is to embody into our vocabularies two new words each day.

A contrast to the above is the famous paragraph of Macaulay's in his *Life of Johnson*.

Never, since literature became a calling in England, had it been a less gainful calling than at the time when Johnson took up his residence in London. In the preceding generation a writer of eminent merit was sure to be munificently rewarded by the government. The least that he could expect was a pension or a sinecure place; and, if he showed any aptitude for politics, he might hope to be a member of Parliament, a Lord of the Treasury, an Ambassador, a Secretary of State. It would be easy, on the other hand, to name several writers of the nineteenth century of whom the least successful has received forty thousand pounds from the booksellers. But Johnson entered on his vocation in the most dreary part of the dreary interval which separated two ages of prosperity. Literature had ceased to flourish under the patronage of the great, and had not begun to flourish under the patronage of the public. One man of letters, indeed, Pope, had acquired by his pen what was then considered as a handsome fortune, and lived on a footing of equality with nobles and ministers of state. But this was a solitary exception. Even an author whose reputation was established, and whose works were popular, such an author as

Thomson, whose "Seasons" were in every library, such an author as Fielding, whose "Pasquin" had had a greater run than any drama since "The Beggar's Opera," was sometimes glad to obtain, by pawning his best coat, the means of dining on tripe at a cookshop underground, where he could wipe his hands, after his greasy meal, on the back of a Newfoundland dog. It is easy, therefore, to imagine what humiliations and privations must have awaited the novice who had still to earn a name. One of the publishers to whom Johnson applied for employment measured with a scornful eye that athletic though uncouth frame, and exclaimed, "You had better get a porter's knot, and carry trunks." Nor was the advice bad, for a porter was likely to be as plentifully fed and as comfortably lodged, as a poet.

A not unsatisfactory précis for this extract is as follows:

When Johnson began his literary career in London, he fell upon the most unpropitious moment possible. In the age preceding his, a writer was sought by the government and richly rewarded; in the succeeding period, so large a reading public had been developed that from it he might secure great remuneration. In Johnson's age, however, even the greatest authors sounded the depths of poverty. It is no wonder, then, that Johnson was advised to take up manual labor rather than literary work.

Milton's sonnet to Cyriak Skinner furnishes the next exercise.

Cyriac, this three years' day these eyes, though clear
To outward view of blemish or of spot,
Bereft of light, their seeing have forgot;
Nor to their idle orbs doth sight appear
Of sun or moon or star, throughout the year,
Or man or woman. Yet I argue not
Against Heaven's hand or will, nor bate a jot
Of heart or hope, but still bear up and steer
Right onward. What supports me, dost thou ask?
The conscience, friend, to have lost them overplied
In Liberty's defence, my noble task,
Of which all Europe rings from side to side.
This thought might lead me through the world's vain mask
Content, though blind, had I no better guide.

A pupil summarized it in one sentence thus:

Milton told Cyriak that although he had seen nothing for

three years, he had never lost heart or hope because he had the consciousness of having lost his sight in his renowned defense of liberty.

In order to make the point that a unit of several paragraphs may be summarized in a single sentence, the section of Burke's *Speech on Conciliation* giving the arguments against the use of force may be employed. The following is the obvious abstract, the work of a pupil:

I do not believe in force for four reasons: It is not lasting; it is not sure; it hurts the spirit of a people; and we have never tried it in the treatment of our colonies.

A sonnet of Wordsworth's, *To Sleep*, resulted in several interesting pieces of work, one showing the influence of the study of Milton in league with the racy English of youth.

A flock of sheep that leisurely pass by
One after one; the sound of rain, and bees
Murmuring; the fall of rivers, winds and seas,
Smooth fields, white sheets of water, and pure sky;
I've thought of all by turns, and yet do lie
Sleepless; and soon the small birds' melodies
Must hear, first utter'd from my orchard trees,
And the first cuckoo's melancholy cry.
Even thus last night, and two nights more I lay,
And could not win thee, Sleep! by any stealth:
So do not let me wear to-night away:
Without Thee what is all the morning's wealth?
Come, blessed barrier between day and day,
Dear mother of fresh thoughts and joyous health!

Three summaries of pupils are as follows:

(1) *For three nights I have had insomnia; here's hoping I win the company of Morpheus to-night.*

(2) *A restless person whom Sleep had eluded for three nights despite his attempts to win her by pleasant thoughts, made a supplication to her for her presence.*

(3) *Although Wordsworth had thought of all those things which relieve insomnia, he had not been able to sleep for two nights, and he then urged Sleep to come so that he might enjoy the morning with all its glories.*

Another paragraph of Palmer's in *Self-Cultivation in English* is useful.

Fortunate it is, then, that self-cultivation in the use of English must chiefly come through speech; because we are always speaking, whatever else we do. In opportunities for acquiring a mastery of language, the poorest and busiest are at no large disadvantage as compared with the leisured rich. It is true the strong impulse which comes from the suggestion and approval of society may in some cases be absent, but this can be compensated by the sturdy purpose of the learner. A recognition of the beauty of well-ordered words, a strong desire, patience under discouragements, and promptness in counting every occasion as of consequence—these are the simple agencies which sweep one on to power. Watch your speech, then. That is all which is needed.

Roosevelt furnishes us with a good paragraph in his vigorous, pointed style.

Let those who have, keep; let those who have not, strive to attain a high standard of cultivation and scholarship. Yet let us remember that these stand second to certain other things. There is need of a sound body; and even more need of a sound mind. But above mind and above body stands character—the sum of those qualities which we mean when we speak of a man's force and courage, of his good faith and sense of honor. I believe in exercise for the body, always provided that we keep in mind that physical development is a means and not an end. I believe, of course, in giving to all people a good education. But the education must contain much besides book learning in order to be really good. We must ever remember that no keenness and subtleness of intellect, no polish, no cleverness, in any way makes up for the lack of the great solid qualities. Self-restraint, self-mastery, common sense, the power of accepting individual responsibility and yet acting in conjunction with others, courage and resolution—these are the qualities which mark a masterful people. Without them no people can control itself, or save itself from being controlled from the outside. I speak to a brilliant assemblage; I speak in a great university which represents the flower of the highest intellectual development; I pay all homage to intellect, and to elaborate and specialized training of the intellect; and yet I know I shall have the assent of all you present when I add that more important still are the commonplace, everyday qualities and virtues.

An exercise of a somewhat different kind consists in telling in one hundred and fifty words the story of *Comus*. This

condensation, the work of a high-school senior, covers the exercise very well:

A maiden and her two brothers, children of the Earl of Bridgewater, were journeying through a dense wood to Ludlow. The wood they were traversing was the haunt of an evil spirit, Comus. This spirit, using diverse temptations, entrapped all whom he encountered, afterward transforming their countenances to those of beasts. The maiden, momentarily deserted by her brothers, was ensnared by his wiles. By different ruses Comus tempted her, but she saw through his deception and resisted temptation. Meanwhile a good spirit dispatched from Heaven, came to her assistance, and aided by her brother put Comus to flight, but the enraged Comus had enchanted the lady. It was necessary, therefore, to invoke some power to overcome the enchantment. Hence the good spirit sought the aid of Sabrina, who dissolved the trance. Thereupon the Earl's children proceeded to the castle. His duty performed, the Attendant Spirit returned to his heavenly abode.

In Burke's *Speech on Conciliation* many paragraphs lend themselves to this exercise very well, notably the one dealing with the ancestry of the colonists. The entire section dealing with commerce is valuable.

If a letter is desired, Johnson's famous *Declaration of Independence* may be used. For narrative, Kipling's *How I Caught Salmon in the Clackamas* will afford pleasure as well as profit. Making a synopsis of a one-act play, like *The Clod*, by Lewis Beach, is another interesting exercise. And if all else fails, one can always fall back on the newspaper editorial.

The pupil who has worked out exercises of this type has surely sensed the force of brevity and point. Both his reading and his own writing must necessarily benefit from the clearer grasp of organization of material. "Mussy" thinking will have received a tremendous blow, so that the pupil through his précis writing may conceivably be better qualified for his duties as a citizen.

PRODUCING THE SCHOOL PLAY

By SUSAN THOMPSON SPAULDING

Formerly Director of Dramatics, Scarborough School.

With the advance in amateur dramatics indicated by the growth of the Little Theatre movement, the question, "What of the school play?" may well seek an answer. The public schools which offer regular courses in dramatics can doubtless be counted on the finger of one hand. Yet the high schools which do not in the course of the year present a play, or some "entertainment" closely connected with dramatic art, may be said to number even less.

The school play, however, has generally been considered an extra curricula activity; presented to make money, or to supplement an English course, or because the students have demanded it as a privilege subject to the provision that lessons should not suffer. The play, in short, has been produced chiefly for the fun of the thing; and fun so derived is in itself no little profit. It is nothing, however, compared with the fun and profit gained if the students have the joy of making the play entirely their own achievement; bar the actual writing of it, which is not always advisable or possible.

The management of the school play must usually be undertaken by a teacher who may be not only herself untrained in dramatics, but also too hard pressed by regular duties to carry the burden without sacrificing time, energy, and peace of mind necessary to her regular work and to her own welfare. Is it not unjust that the usual arrangement for school productions should at the same time sacrifice the teacher needlessly, and deprive the pupils of their rightful opportunity for growth?

In schools where the teacher is customarily responsible for the success of a production, there may arise some question as to the procedure involved, or as to the practicability of a plan whereby the pupils are held accountable for the outcome of the venture. The greatest impediment in the way of group accomplishment is the habit of considering the play from the responsible-teacher, irresponsible-pupil angle. In this connection several facts must be borne in mind: that a high-school pupil is old enough to bear responsibility if he wants

to, and that for the good of his soul he must bear it; that the dramatic instinct is inherent in each one of us; that high-school boys and girls need many outlets for energy and emotion; that they usually need assistance toward self-confidence and self-expression; and that it is imperative that every member in a group-undertaking should be employed to the full extent of his powers and his time. All these points considered, there are few activities more wholesome, interesting, or gratifying than play production; when the production results from an efficient group organization. There is no activity permitting greater opportunity for the use of all talents; for if a pupil cannot act, he is bound to show interest in some of the other work connected with plays.

As an instance of the practicability of a class-produced play, I am going to narrate one of my own experiences. I was teaching in a high school in a western plains town, and found myself in the position of being "in charge" of an annual class play. Former play-producing teachers had apparently done all the work save actually to learn the lines; that is to say, if I followed their precedent I was to choose the play, produce it, plan and find the costumes, secure the properties, advertise, select and direct the ushers. The pupils themselves obviously understood the production to mean no more to them than the merry rehearsing of lines for such of them as had the luck to be cast for parts.

I determined to proceed as though I were conducting a course in dramatics. There were obstacles. The class was, by reputation, "the wildest class in the wildest school in the state;" they might not rise to the occasion, thereby jeopardizing all chances of the definite money profit which must be realized, and disappointing those appreciative townsfolk to whom a high-school play was an important event. Nevertheless, my conviction that it was unfair to teacher and class that the teacher should bear all the responsibility, and do most of the work, remained stronger than my misgivings.

I first called upon the class officers to read plays. They wrote to various dramatic publishers for catalogs; and while we waited for those, we considered different types of plays, their suitability to the group, to the expected audience, and to our equipment. When the catalogs came we knew what to

look for, and the final selection was made from plays which the pupils themselves had chosen. The president then called a class meeting to explain that the play demanded only seven characters, to be picked from a class of nineteen, thus leaving twelve pupils free for other work. We, therefore, submitted the following plan: the cast was to be selected, the coach acting as judge, from those members of the class who tried out for one or more parts. The class officers and coach would thereafter choose, from the remaining number, committees for all the work save coaching and general management, which were to be my share. The plan was received enthusiastically. They, at least, had no apprehensions as to the outcome.

A few days later notice was posted on the bulletin board announcing members of the cast, committees and their chairmen, with such rules as are necessary in the conduct of a school play. The following list may be of some help to those teachers who find themselves frantically in the predicament of being entirely responsible for a school play.

Costumes: chairman and assistants. Their duties: to discover from books and other sources the fashions prevalent in the period of the play; then to borrow or rent the necessary costumes (or, if the domestic-arts teacher and classes wish to co-operate, to make them) and to return the costumes after the production.

Property; duties: to ascertain from the manuscript what properties are necessary, to locate such properties, to borrow or rent them, to return them after the production, to place all properties for the production, to shift and place sets.

Advertising; duties: to write and place newspaper notices; to solicit the co-operation of art classes in illustrating posters; to post the bulletins throughout the town; to inform the schools; to solicit trades-people's advertisements, if desired, for programmes.

Business; duties: to procure and distribute tickets to agents whom they shall choose; to have printed accurate and attractive programmes, or, if the school owns a printing press, to print these themselves; the manager to be responsible for all money involved in the production.

Ushers; duties: to select from other classes pupils qualified, in ability and courtesy, to usher; to instruct them con-

cerning the seating-plan, exits, fire-rules; to usher themselves; the head usher to supervise all the work of the ushers.

A list of understudies should always be posted, as a reminder that provision is made to expel from the cast all delinquent characters. Rules about rehearsals should be enforced, and lines learned by assignment; thereby insuring the best work from every actor.

Wild as this particular class was, it buckled down to work as a unit, too deeply interested to make discipline necessary. I have no doubt that the novelty of the procedure first caught their attention; but after the first week they were held by the pleasure of carrying out plans of their own making, watching the definite and tangible results of their own labors, realizing what might be accomplished by thoughtful planning and organization. When the programmes were ready, the committees read their printed names, and knew that success or failure would reflect as much on them as on the cast.

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